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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000008

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA; ALSO FOR H

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SUBJECT: FOR CUBANS, A NOT-SO-MERRY CHRISTMAS

REF: A. HAVANA 23616

¶B. HAVANA 00005

HAVANA 0000008 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶11. (C) Summary: At year's end, USINT delivered a letter from U.S. Congress members to Cuban human rights activists, and in the process learned about the subdued holiday season in Havana. The letter, a reply from December CODEL leaders Reps. Jeff Flake and William Delahunt to a message from activists Elizardo Sanchez, Vladimiro Roca and Martha Beatriz Roque, underlines the Representatives' opposition to "U.S. travel restrictions and other aspects of the embargo (that) block contacts that we should be encouraging between our two countries." The activists, who hoped for but did not receive a visit from the Representatives during their December 15-17 stay in Havana, expressed gratitude for the prompt reply. But at least one, Roque, reiterated that she does not support any easing of travel restrictions. The activists expressed regret over what they viewed as Havana's quietest Christmas in years, and blamed a mix of frustration, depression and lack of cash. That said, restaurants were packed, as were churches. End Summary.

¶12. (C) On December 29, USINT delivered a letter (text sent to WHA) from Representatives Jeff Flake and William Delahunt to Elizardo Sanchez (of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation), Vladimiro Roca (All United) and Martha Beatriz Roque (Assembly to Promote Civil Society). The fourth intended recipient, Gisela Delgado Sablon of the Independent Libraries Project, was unavailable. In a previous letter delivered December 17 to Reps. Flake and Delahunt, the four activists stressed the importance of U.S. assistance to Cuba's opposition, the flow of which seemed to the activists to have slowed in the wake of the recently released GAO report.

¶13. (C) In reply, Reps Flake and Delahunt thanked the activists for their information on the reduced flow of aid, and said they expected USAID's management of the Cuba program to be improved. The Representatives also referred to a November 23 public statement issued by the four activists, "in which you call for an end to the restrictions that the United States imposes on travel and the sending of aid to Cuba. We agree that the elimination of those restrictions would provide humanitarian and many other benefits to the peoples of both our countries."

¶14. (C) The November 23 statement, which lacked precision and

sparked controversy among some Cuban exiles, was followed by a press conference from Roque (Reftel A), who said that the statement should not be misconstrued as an appeal to relax overall travel restrictions, only such restrictions that interfere with aid deliveries.

NOT-SO-MERRY CHRISTMAS

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¶ 15. (C) Sanchez, Roca and Roque described with sadness what they saw as Havana's most low-energy Christmas in years. Sanchez told us December 29 that celebrations in the Havana area were noticeably subdued. He said many residents were depressed, had little to celebrate and no money to spend on festivities. He said divorce and migrations have divided many Cuban families, and that at his home, where 14 family members once lived, now live four people, the other 10 having emigrated. Roca told us December 29 that Christmas festivities were few and far between in his neighborhood of New Vedado, and blamed widespread frustration, as well as the breakdown of the family unit.

BUT NOT ALL WAS DREARY

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¶ 16. (SBU) Not all was dreary, however. Martha Beatriz Roque used exile donations to prepare hundreds of gift packages for neighbors and for families of political prisoners. Leading Havana restaurants were packed with Cuban elites and the families of visiting Cuban-Americans. (Israeli actress Natalie Portman dined inconspicuously at La Guarida on December 26.) Many Cubans of lesser means, but who could nevertheless afford to purchase pork (\$1 per pound), held a traditional Christmas dinner at home. Others, including those reliant entirely on the GOC for their income, made do with such ration-card staples as rice, beans and roots (yucca, sweet potatoes or, if lucky, regular potatoes).

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GOC HAILS "GREAT ODE TO HAPPINESS"

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¶ 17. (SBU) The GOC trumpeted the scattered News Years Eve festivities, gushing in a January 2 article in Granma: "At plazas and parks, esplanades and streets, a new and great ode to happiness multiplied its echo across the length and width of the country." This ode presumably referred to a number of public concerts held over the holidays, including at the "Anti-Imperialist Tribune" outside USINT. The GOC's other tribute to the January 1 holiday - the 48th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution -- was the flying of Cuban flags in front of USINT. By January 3 these were replaced with the customary black flags with white stars.

CHURCHES THRONGED

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¶ 18. (C) Church services were well attended over the holidays. Roque said the Christmas-Eve mass at her church was standing room only. She observed: "When people don't have money to celebrate, they tend to take refuge at church." At Havana's Cathedral, Cardinal Ortega delivered a January 1 homily (septel) that raised eyebrows with its repeated references to human rights, a theme usually put forward with considerable nuance, so as to preserve the Church's modus operandi in communist Cuba.

COMMENT

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¶ 19. (C) General frustration among Cubans is prevalent and pervasive, thanks to crumbling housing, inadequate transportation systems, unrewarding work and the perpetual hunt for food. Adding to this frustration was Fidel Castro's New Years message (reftel B), which has the effect of

prolonging the indecision over Cuba's future that has characterized the island since Raul Castro assumed control last July 31.

PARMLY